
Witnessing the Cultural Revolution at its Dawn

To this day, I am not sure why the Chinese government approved my request to visit the PRC in the summer of 1966.

On a hot and humid early August Sunday, a fellow student from the University of Hawaii and I walked across the border in Hong Kong at Lo Wu to the then-sleepy village of Shenzhen, where we boarded a train to Guangzhou. We were to spend three weeks in China visiting various cities as the Cultural Revolution slowly unfolded. Our ability to make this visit came as a complete surprise, although both George (my UH student colleague) and I had long wanted to visit the “Chinese mainland.” George was a pre-med major but had studied Chinese as a student in New York, and I was an Asian Studies major with a focus on China and two years of experience studying Mandarin. We were in Asia because we had been selected as student representatives to attend a conference in Tokyo, the 14th annual Gensuikyo conference on nuclear weapons.

While at the conference, we made the acquaintance of a Chinese Xinhua news correspondent, You Zhizhong, the first person from mainland China either of us had met. We pumped him with questions about China. You was a friendly sort, about six feet tall and able to speak Japanese and English fairly well, who humored both of us. At the ripe age of twenty, George and I both displayed our naïveté about events in China. When we learned that other conference participants—mostly from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, France, Belgium, Canada, and other nations—often visited China, we badgered You to try to get us visas as well. He patiently explained that this was not possible: the U.S. passport did not allow travel to “communist controlled portions of China,” the Vietnam War was raging, and there was the “problem of Taiwan.” Nevertheless, we kept at it and urged him to send a cable to the All-China Student Federation (ACSF) to see if they would sponsor us. He reluctantly agreed, but when two days passed and You had still not received a response, we prepared to visit Hiroshima and then return to Hawaii. Just as George and I were checking out of the hotel, though, You came up to us with a cable in his hand saying that much to his surprise, our visas had been approved for three months if we could pick them up in Hong Kong. We cabled friends in Hawaii for additional funds and made our way to Hong Kong, where the

China Travel Service clipped the visas into our passports and arranged for our train to Lo Wu.

Who approved our visa applications and why remains a mystery. I have made inquiries at high levels in China, and my sources there are not sure either.

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It was not quite so easy to cross the border, though, as the border controls on the British side made us wait while they called someone at the U.S. Consulate in Hong Kong. I spoke with a very bemused consular official, who suggested that we come to the Consulate on Monday to discuss the whole matter. As he put it, “you might get in some trouble if you go into China and we can’t protect you.” Having gotten this far, we decided not to chance a reversal of this process, so George and I said we would just proceed and face the consequences when we returned. He wished us luck and off we went.

Our first stop was Guangzhou, where two officials of the All-China Student Federation met us and took us to the Guangzhou Hotel in a Phoenix (Fenghuang) automobile that looked surprisingly like a Plymouth. Guangzhou had a tropical air about it, and in some respects reminded us of older sections of Honolulu: the flora was similar, as was the food. Mr. Chan, the more senior of the ACSF staff (certainly not a student; he said he was thirty-five years old), was very proper and helpful but made it clear that his main goal was to get us on a plane to Beijing in the morning. We had a nice Cantonese dinner at the hotel and walked a bit around the hotel area, which was lightly populated with street vendors and small shopkeepers. I had little chance to interact with them or with hotel personnel, all of whom spoke Cantonese and no English. Still, everyone was cordial and did not seem surprised to see non-Chinese walking around the hotel, even though we seemed to be the only non-Chinese staying there. The next morning, we ate a Western-style breakfast in the main dining hall and Mr. Chan picked us up around 2 p.m. to go to the airport for the flight to Beijing.

We boarded a Russian-built China Airlines Ilyushin prop plane, were met by two representatives of the All-China Student Federation, and checked into the Beijing Hotel. During the three weeks that followed, the Cultural Revolution was beginning to develop. There was already a sense of excitement in the air when we arrived in the capital, and we later saw student groups meeting near Peking University (Beida) and other universities in Beijing, as well as in the streets around the Beijing Hotel. We learned the next morning that two days earlier, on August 5, Chairman Mao’s

now notorious wall poster (*dazibao*) entitled “Bombard the Headquarters,” had been put up and had created a stir among university students. Also at this time the Eleventh Plenum of the Eighth CCPCC meeting was taking place and on August 8 issued a sixteen-point communiqué approving of radical student organizations, which became known as Red Guards.

For the next three days, George and I visited the sights of Beijing: the Ming Tombs, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, and the Great Wall. The All-China Student Federation assigned Mr. Wu, an official of the organization, to organize our activities and accompany us on our official outings. We called him Xiao (small) Wu because he was very short and younger than another Mr. Wu, who was his superior. He wore thick glasses and was clearly university educated, speaking a kind of Oxfordian English. During our spare time, we roamed unaccompanied around Beijing as we wished. Our visit to the Great Wall was memorable for many reasons, but looking back, it was memorable partly because we were the only visitors on the wall that day! Compared to the congested traffic of today, Beijing streets were notable for the number of bicycles and people walking, with buses and the occasional automobile driving through.

On August 10, Mr. Wu excitedly informed us that we had been invited to a banquet for foreign guests at the Great Hall of the People that evening. The other guests, based on those who sat at our table, were a mix of international students, representatives of various organizations such as the Bertrand Russell Society, and members of political parties such as the Malaysian Chinese Association. A number of dignitaries, including Premier Zhou Enlai, Guo Moruo, Chen Yi, and Zhu De, also attended the banquet. Zhou Enlai came by our table and asked me what I thought of U.S.-China relations. When I replied that I hoped they would improve, he gave a short laugh and said that he thought that was very likely but would take some time. I had a much longer conversation with Guo Moruo about his literary work and the time he spent in Japan. He was very curious about life in the US and questioned me about my studies at the university. He welcomed me to write to him in the future (which in fact I did) and he arranged for my second visit to China in 1971. We talked little about the Cultural Revolution and the mood was very social and upbeat. Just one year later Guo himself would be attacked as a “rightist.”

On the evening of August 11, we had just finished dinner at the hotel when we heard what sounded like a parade coming down East Chang'an Avenue. Drums and cymbals were being struck; George and I went out into the street and saw several hundred Red Guards marching down the boulevard. We joined them and learned from some of the students that Chairman Mao had visited a reception

center in Beijing that morning in support of the students, and that this had created a great deal of excitement. The mood was festive and positive in contrast to the chaos and violence that developed not long after our trip. Students were baffled when they found out we were Americans but were not at all hostile, only saying that they opposed U.S. policy in Vietnam but not the American people. The parade stopped in Tiananmen Square and students began reading political communiqués and other policy statements supporting what was now being called the Cultural Revolution. We did not understand all of what was being said, but we knew that something big was happening in Chinese politics.

The next day we left for our sojourn to other cities: to Jinan, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, and finally back to Guangzhou. At each stop, we visited the usual local tourist sites, but more importantly had a chance to meet other Chinese students, workers in local industries, families, and children. In Hangzhou, we spent time on a tea farm, meeting the collective leader and local workers and having tea and dinner on West Lake. In Shanghai, we went to a machine tools plant, since I was brought up in a steel town in the Midwest, and to a special education school, since that was one of George's interests. We found that Chinese families, students, workers, and farmers shared many concerns with their counterparts in the U.S. Although the political climate was heading in a turbulent direction, this was not readily apparent, at least to ordinary Chinese, as far as we could tell. Mr. Liu, the head of the Shanghai school for blind and hearing impaired, came across as a well-trained and extremely committed teacher/administrator whom the students in the school clearly respected. Though facilities were simple, his devotion to duty was high. He was very curious about the U.S. experience with special education and what we now call "mainstreaming," and we spent most of one afternoon talking with him about these issues. Like educators everywhere, he expressed distress at the lack of funding available to schools like his.

We also got to know Ms. Li well, an English language high school teacher who was made available in Shanghai to help with translation. She was in her early thirties and free on summer break. Unlike some of the officials we met in the ACSF, Ms. Li was stylishly dressed and very open about the shortcomings of China's educational system. We spent quite a bit of time with her and she introduced us to different restaurants and sites in Shanghai. One afternoon, she asked if we wanted to go on a picnic in a park outside of Shanghai. She procured some bicycles and the three of us plus another teacher cycled out to Gongqing Forest Park for an enjoyable afternoon of Shanghai appetizers and beer.

For the most part, we wandered unaccompanied around the streets of the old French Concession, engaged in discussions with other students (who were mostly interested in the developments of the Cultural Revolution), and met shopkeepers and small business operators. I spent some time with the operator of a small motorcycle repair shop since I had a motorcycle back in Honolulu, helped repair the carburetor on a scooter, and drank beer with him later in the afternoon; he seemed completely unaware of and uninterested in the Cultural Revolution.

One day we were assigned a car to take us to visit a factory. We ran into a group of Red Guards, who surrounded the car and criticized Ms. Li and us for riding in a car while the ordinary workers had to take public transportation. They pasted paper banners with revolutionary slogans on the car to criticize her bourgeois behavior. At this, the driver got very angry and stepped out of the car to confront them, saying that he had worked hard to wash the car and they had gotten it dirty, that he was a worker doing his job, and they were not workers so how could they criticize him and dirty up his car. This seemed to quiet them down—they agreed to wash his car later and let us go on our way.

Another night, George and I heard what sounded like another parade and followed some French tourists out on the roof of the Jinjiang Hotel to watch a crowd of young Chinese running down the street with wheelbarrows full of what turned out to be ancestral tablets. These, we learned later, were burned in a large bonfire. Our handlers subsequently told us that we might have to leave China early because the deteriorating political situations made it difficult for them to host us properly.

This was indeed the case, and a few days later we went to Guangzhou for another overnight, then proceeded to Hong Kong, Tokyo, and back to Honolulu. The most vibrant memory I have of all of this is of the variety of Chinese people we met, especially the “ordinary” work-a-day Chinese, who displayed all of the concerns, joys, worries, and hopes of people we knew in our lives in the U.S. They certainly bore no resemblance to the “blue ants” of China described in [a book I had read in the early 1960s](#).

Indeed, as I reflect back on this brief period in China I remain struck by how genuinely concerned many university students were in issues of educational access and equity. There had been an incident at Beijing Normal University, I believe, where a student of “worker-rural” class background had been dismissed—or at least that is how this was related to us by other students.

The students saw this as a form of hypocrisy of the leadership of the university, if not the Communist Party, both of whom were tasked with “serving the people.” The students we spoke with on the street and at universities were critical of higher education in China as being elitist and favoring urban students of higher socio-economic status. On the other hand, non-student residents of the cities we visited seemed unconcerned about this rising social movement and what went on in universities. As mentioned above, they were primarily focused on their own lives and well-being. Having visited China over twenty times since this first visit, I think these educational issues basically remain. We now know, of course, that there were much larger political-economic tensions in the Communist Party that led to a much more violent outcome. But in those last days of summer in 1966 there was little evidence of the turmoil that was to come.

When we arrived in Honolulu, U.S. immigration promptly relieved us of our passports. We didn’t receive them back for two years, when the regulations were changed; but that’s another story.

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